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TIME FOR DECISION ON FUTURE SUBMARINES

David Johnston revealed his 'vision' for the Future Submarine force today – but we are still a long way from a decision.

The Minister's comments about the acute importance to Australia of a highly capable submarine force are welcomed – particularly over the next 100 years of the Asia-Pacific century, when a strong deterrent force will be even more important.

Sovereign control of our submarine force is also vitally important, as Minister Johnston acknowledged – we can't afford our primary deterrent capability to be held hostage to someone else's commercial or government interests.

For this reason we must build the submarines in Australia as well as upgrade and maintain them here through their life, and own the Intellectual Property of their design. The skills learnt during the Collins build are being put to good use now in improving their availability and managing their service life extension.

Johnston says his focus is on the capability and availability of the Future Submarine rather than the size of the force. This is the right focus at this end of the submarine program, given that building a larger submarine force will take many decades.

But we must keep in mind one of the key lessons of the past 50 years of Australian submarines – that a force of six is below the critical mass needed to maintain the submarine workforce, sustain the submarine industry and therefore provide a credible strategic deterrent.

The more uncertain times ahead will require a stronger submarine force so we need to plan for that from the start.

The SIA welcomes the Government's focus on the submarine capability and agrees that the Future Submarine decision will be the most important Defence decision in the forthcoming White Paper – as it will set the foundation for Australia's primary deterrent capability over the next century.

Time is short however, and we can't afford to go back over old ground. It's time to get moving on the Future Submarine.

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